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ABSTRACT

Although listening skills are the most utilized of the language arts skills, they are the least analyzed by research. Causes for this neglect include the fact that listening research has not adequately confronted the basic question of the nature of listening and has utilized correlational studies with ready-made definitions and formats, the widespread notion that "listening develops naturally," and the influence of the competence/performance distinction from theoretical linguistics. This last distinction has been productive in discussions of language learning theory but has increasingly been viewed as problematical as various studies have merged competence/comprehension categories with performance/production categories. The question of the relationship between receptive language abilities and productive language abilities has not yet been answered. (TJ)

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AUDITORY RECEPTIVE LANGUAGE ABILITIES AND THE COMPETENCE/PERFORMANCE DISTINCTION.

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Introduction

Arguments for both the general importance of listening comprehension skills in elementary school curricula and the need for more research attention to listening comprehension have commonly been adduced from two main types of observation. One concerns the quantitative dominance of listening in language behaviour generally (e.g. Flanders 1965; Duker 1969:747); the other relates to what Johnson called the "ominous increase in the world's volubility" (1949:34).

The first type of argument is, of course, by itself not a necessary reason for special curricular attention but evidence does exist on both the existence of significant differentials in related skills (e.g. Spearritt 1962) and the occurrence of significant partial comprehension and miscomprehension in the aural mode (even in adults and with accompanying visual stimuli) (e.g. Trenaman 1967). Recent growth in the attention to teacher-class lingusitic interaction (e.g. Bellack et al. 1966; Barnes 1976) and the salience of passive listening also, implicitly, casts doubt on the efficiency of much pupil listening behaviour.

The second main type of argument emphasizes, in the light of the dramatic increase in aural communication media, a need to provide pupils with essentially defensive and discriminating training for resistance to growing ideological and commercial techniques of persuasion. Interest in the area of 'critical listening' has been a clear, though scarcely coordinated, reflection of this emphasis on what might be called 'applied rhetoric' (Lundsteen 1971, 1976; Hackett 1968).

Despite the heuristically convincing nature of such propositions, the nature and development of aural skills has suffered a peculiar neglect in both basic and applied research (Clark and Meredith 1972). This is evident, for example, in reviews of research on language acquisition before and after five years of age (Ervin-Tripp and Slobin 1966; Palermo and Molfese 1972), in the clear imbalance between reading and listening research (Wright 1971), and - within the recent curricular re-emphasis of oracy - in the relative concentration on speech (Wilkinson 1969/70; Wells 1976:24).

Given this general situation of listening skills being the most utilized and the least analyzed, the question of why listening comprehension is relatively neglected is clearly unavoidable.

Possible Causes of Neglect

One possible, self-reinforcing reason would seem to be connected with the state of listening research itself (Russell 1964; Devine 1967). In this respect,

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Benson has noted that observed confusion amongst teachers concerning the nature and teaching of listening skills "is a reasonable reflection of the activities of researchers in the field" (1974:1).

Two general characteristics of listening research which come to mind in this regard are: a certain diffidence in confronting the basic question of the nature and components of the construct itself and the related phenomenon of a general preference for correlational studies which utlize ready-made construct definitions and formats from a few standardized tests, often derivative of reading comprehension research. One still finds it being confidently asserted, for example, that tests of vocabulary and syntactic knowledge are an adequate operationalization of receptive language skills generally (e.g. Osser et al. 1969; Wheldall and Martin 1977).

Some confusion is, of course, to be expected, since the comprehension construct generally is clearly complex - extending in meaning from 'understanding' to 'interpretation' (an operation that may be compared with 'production' in that it is constructive: as evidenced by the common phrase 'meaning-making'). Similarly, the unit of comprehension is an open-ended category which may range from minimal sounds/words/structures to, say, the 'meaning-extraction' implicit in a Leavis's critique of a novelist's whole oeuvre or an Henri Pirenne's account of a whole era (medieval Europe).

On the other hand, the relative lack of attention paid to listening at quite fundamental levels is perhaps surprising when one considers the procedural advantage of being "much more able to gain control over the language input into the child than over the language output" (Mittler 1975:69).

Another possible cause of neglect would seem to be a widespread notion that 'listening develops naturally' (Duff 1964:4) - or, to be more precise, that it develops to a sufficient, adequate degree and that possible listener-differences are insignificant (Bullock Report 1975:150; Randall 1972:8; Duff and Clark 1975). Possibly integral to this notion might be an unconscious principle held by educators that since children arrive at school already able to talk and listen, then the task of the school is essentially one of literacy-training.

A third possible cause of neglect would appear to be associated with the influence of the competence/performance distinction from theoretical linguistics. It is on this aspect which the present paper now concentrates.

The Competence/Performance Distinction

The distinction (Chomsky 1965:3ff,20ff) was of special significance in defining the grammarian's essential task of abstracting the coding principles of a language (and language generally). To this end, it emphasized the difference between the actual use of language (performance) and the implicit knowledge (competence) which could explain such use in principle.

The distinction has clearly been productive in discussions of language learning theory and language instruction but has increasingly been viewed as problematical (e.g. Gleitman et al. 1965; Palmer 1971:160f; Stich 1971:486f; Cooper 1975:37; Robinson 1975:67ff). Derwing (1973:259ff), for example, has located three distinct interpretations of the concept in Chomsky's writings alone, whereby claims for its empirical significance are gradually weakened until it is reducible to a somewhat vague notion of 'potential' - which to some commentators appears rather trite, akin perhaps to Lenneberg's (1967) analogy of language with the ability of humans to walk upright.

The precise details of such issues concern us less in the present context than the fact that this essentially 'generalist' point of view about language has proved to be seductive even in discussions of language within a variable framework (namely within certain studies which might be described as falling under the heading of educational sociolinguistics).

From such studies it is evident that a fairly pervasive misunderstanding of the competence/performance distinction exists which might explain a general bias for the study of productive language behaviour.

'Receptive Competence'

Troike proposed a clear-cut distinction between receptive and productive competence on the grounds that he had studied certain children who:

> "...are bidialectal, with an asymmetry in their bidialectal performance, since they can presumably both understand and produce the forms of one, 'nonstandard' dialect, while understanding, but not producing, the forms of a second, 'standard', dialect" (1969:67).

A similar type of conclusion was arrived at by Labov and Cohen (1967) and by Labov (1972) in studies of low-SES Negro children.

This notion of receptive competence aligns uniformity in language behaviour with competence and variability with performance. Problems associated with it are:

(a) The studies referred to above employed the device of oral sentence-repetition (e.g. 'the children go to bed', nonstandard imitation = 'the children goes to bed'). While consistent transformation of certain aspects of standard-form sentences by nonstandard speakers clearly implies both the comprehension of the standard form and a relationship between the imitative response and the speaker's productive language system, it would seem to be somewhat extravagant on the basis of such stimuli to infer a generalized receptive uniformity.

(b) 'Receptive competence' suggests the necessity to posit 'productive competence' to account for the common phenomenon of communities of speakers who habitually use one or more social or geographical dialects in addition to a standard language-form.

(c) There is a naturally wide disparity in speakers' receptive and productive capacities. As Straight has pointed out: "...listeners readily interpret impaired, distorted or otherwise aberrent speech without being able to reproduce such speech" (1976:532). This general, relative imbalance (involving phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic aspects) need not imply, however, that comprehension abilities do not vary significantly between speakers.

This lack of a distinction between larger and a relatively invariant receptive capacity is frequently encountered in research. Stern and Bryson (1970), for example, in a study of children's productive and receptive mastery of adjectival comparative/superlative suffixes, concluded that receptive capacity must reflect competence because of its relatively low degree of difficulty for subjects. Similar conclusions were reached by Baratz (1969) and Jordan (1972).

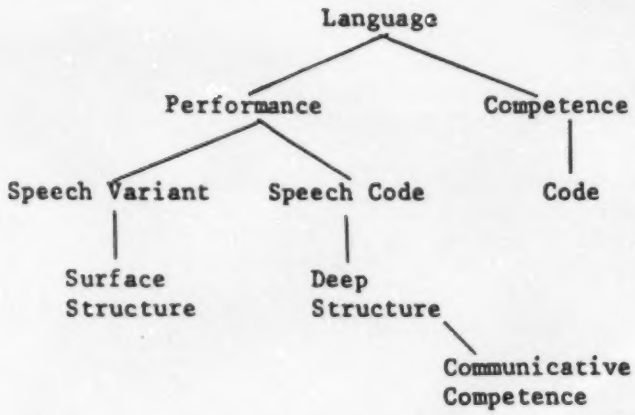
Bernstein's Code Theory

Despite initial doubts (Bernstein 1958:160, 1961:171), Bernstein's rather vague dismissal of striking class-specific differences in verbal intelligence (1960:275) gradually crystallized into the proposition that class-specific receptive differences of either a structural/syntactic or a lexical/semantic nature did not exist (1970:115f, 1971:195) and investigations by Bernstein and colleagues have repeatedly controlled receptive aspects by matching subjects for verbal intelligence (Robinson 1965; Turner and Pickvance 1973; Robinson and Creed 1973).

Discussion of the concept of 'code' itself is not possible within the present limits of space. Suffice it to say that by 1972 it had undergone progressive broadening, appearing in simplified form as follows:

Figure 1

General Structure of Bernstein's Code Concept (1972).



The concept shows readjustment towards competence - which, initially, was separated strictly from it. The specific question which is of relevance for present concerns is, however: if the 'speech code' is essentially an aspect of competence (or a special sort of competence) why would receptive language be irrelevant?

In the only section in his writings where specific mention is made of the competence/performance distinction, Bernstein states:

> "I want first of all to make it clear what I am not concerned with. Chomsky, in Aspects of the Theory of Syntax, neatly severs the study of the rule system of language from the study of the social rules which determine their contextual use. He does this by making a distinction between competence and performance. Competence refers to the child's tacit understanding of the rule system, performance relates to the essentially special use to which the rule system is put. Competence refers to man abstracted from contextual restraints. Performance refers to man in the grip of the contextual restraints which determine his speech acts. Competence refers to the Ideal, performance refers to the Fall. In this sense Chomsky's notion of competence is Platonic. Competence has its source in the very biology of man. There is no difference between men in terms of their access to the linguistic rule system. Here Chomsky like many other linguists before him, announces the communality of man; all men have equal access to the creative act which is language. On the other hand, performance is under the control of the social - performances are culturally specific acts, they refer to the choices which are made in specific speech encounters. Thus, according to Hymes, Chomsky indicates the tragedy of man, the potentiality of competence and the degeneration of performance" (1971:173).

A confusion is evident here between 'understanding' or 'comprehension' and 'competence' (see sentence 3 above). Although linguistic competence was conceived by Chomsky and generative grammarians generally as the sort of knowledge an

ideal speaker-listener "would have to have in order to create and understand sentences" (Williams 1972:66), it would appear that the term 'knowledge' tends to connote consistently the passive or receptive aspects of language behaviour.

Further confusion is evident above in Bernstein's alignment of terms like 'available', 'access' and 'poteniality' with the notion of 'equality'. The implication is that potential availability confers on speakers equal 'knowledge'. It is also apparent that the term performance is extended from 'use' to 'activity', 'speech act' and 'speaking'. In the pentultimate sentence above, for example, Bernstein uses 'performance' in two distinct senses: as an abstract term (in the singular) and as a concrete term (in the plural), suggesting ordinary language connotations of 'acts/actions'.

It would thus seem that Bernstein's refusal to consider receptive language differences (as a possible effect within his theoretical framework) is connected with an unfortunate merging of the competence/comprehension categories and the performance/production categories.

Conclusions

These examples of doubtful operationalizations of the competence/performance distinction are possibly explicable in terms of the following:

(a) the ubiquitous assumption that the only alternative to a competence-model of language learning is an operant conditioning theory of language - or, as formulated by Miller, the only two tenable theories of language acquisition are "the miracle theory or the impossible theory" (cited in Glucksberg and Danks 1975:147). This problematical viewpoint is at last being challenged by a cognitive-interactionist approach to language development (e.g. John 1972; Smith 1975; Edmonds 1976).

(b) the emotional appeal of the idea of competence as 'potential'. This is particularly evident in Hymes's writings where competence is embraced as an alternative to any notions of genetic inferiority but where, at the same time, difficulty is experienced in reconciling the notion of competence with inequalities in linguistic performance (Hymes 1972: 270, 287). (1)

(c) confusion of the technical sense of competence with the ordinary language term 'competency' (e.g. Freedle and Carroll 1972:359f; Hymes 1972:282).

(d) an initial bias in transformationist theory towards productive language. According to Derwing (1973:259ff), for example, the notion of competence as a set of grammatical instructions for performing/generating speech concentrated on recursiveness (the creative aspect of language whereby a speaker is able to produce/comprehend sentences not previously said/understood) as its essential explanatory principle. This involved, according to Derwing, a failure to incorporate two other, equally intrinsic characteristics of language: selectivity (involving notions of coherence and appropriateness) and 'bi-directionality' (the encoding and decoding abilities). In this respect, Straight has noted the conceptual difficulty associated with the explanatory priority given to production over reception in the 'analysis by synthesis' theory of speech perception (Halle and Stevens 1964), based on the Miller and Chomsky model of the language user (1963). According to Straight: "...our well-known ability to interpret input that we cannot ourselves produce argues strongly against any attempt to reduce comprehension (analysis) to production (synthesis)" (1976:528).

Finally, this last point I take to be integral to an essential question yet to be answered: what is the relationship between receptive language abilities and productive language abilities?

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(1) Hymes (1971), in fact, formulated competence in a paper in 1968 in terms very similar to those used by Bernstein, conceptualized 'recognition and

(Footnote cont.)

comprehension of speech' in terms of competence and represented explicitly the view that receptive abilities were essentially invariant. With reference to the emotional appeal of the competence concept, Hymes (1973:79) subsequently advocated the dropping of the term competence in its technical sense so that proper attention could be given to 'inequalities amongst speakers' and referred to the 1960's as an example of a Zeitgeist which treated "mention of differences as grounds for suspicion of prejudice, if not racism".

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